Prologue

Before presenting Dr. Levi Christopher's manuscript, a few facts must be made known to the reader. Dr. Christopher was professor of the university's intro philosophy courses for the greater part of thirty years, was married with a son, was an active law abiding member of his community and had never shown the slightest hint of mental aberration.

Unlike other philosophers, however, he never felt that his discipline was the only source of truth or the only source of relevant knowledge. He often remarked to me his frustration at his colleagues who felt that all of life's answers lay in only science or only philosophy or even only in religion. He felt that since men processed with their feeling, faith, reason and experience, then all needed to be developed. Thus, science, philosophy, religion and the arts were all necessary to have a full

view of the world, or as full a view as mankind could hope for.

Then, his heart issues began. He had a series of minor heart attacks followed by a forced leave of absence. Within a week, he was found dead. Among his possessions were found several manuscripts of the following account. Only one was complete, for reasons that will become clear in the reading.

Take the following story as you will.

Walter Jameson

President, Oakwood University, Oakwood, IN

20- -

I

I was preparing to return to class when Death came for me.

I am Levi Christopher, professor of philosophy for Oakwood University. Having been out on leave for a few months due to a heart attack, I was eager to return to my teaching and a semblance of normalcy. Not only for my sake, but for the sake of my poor wife, who had been alternatively angry and anguished with worry this whole time. Caring, she called it, and I found that I didn't want care if it meant so much grief for her. I would rather have love alone, but no care, despite her insistence that that would be impossible.

So I weakened, was operated on, reassessed, strengthened through rehab, and returned home in the midst of her care and now hoped that we could put it all behind us and focus on what lay ahead.

My introductory lecture had been planned, and I perused my notes with perhaps more pride than became a Christian. Still, I took comfort in Mr. Lewis' belief that

satisfaction for a job, finished to the best of one's abilities, was the natural reward of accomplishment and not completely tainted by ego.

My lecture contended that the search for one theory to explain everything didn't begin with our own age. On the contrary, the ancient Greeks sought it first, in their philosophy that also doubled as their science. The pre Socratics had sought the fundamental element from which everything was made, championing one of the classical elements over the others, or a combination of all four.

Then, Pythagoras and Plato came and suggested the underlying element may be spiritual or abstract, rather than material. Perhaps the concept of numbers, or the forms of things. Later, under the Neo Platonists and medieval theologians, God was added in as the author of forms. Thus, religion was combined with science and

philosophy. And since art was almost exclusively religious in that era, it was added along. Thus all four of the branches of human knowledge were seen as one.

Later, with the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation and Scientific Revolution separated science and religion from philosophy. Philosophy turned epistemological, that is, focused on reason itself. Various thinkers championed the source of reason as either being innate or rising from the senses. In the ensuing ages, as science gained prominence over the other disciplines, and underlying theory of everything was seen as its domain. Scientists discovered subatomic force and matter particles and described the four fundamental forces to explain all.

However, because man interprets the world through reason, experience, faith and feeling, then all four need to be studied, through philosophy, science, religion and

the arts. To neglect any area of study would be to have a narrower view of the world.

Such were my notes and thoughts when I felt the presence of another behind me. I was seated at the desk in my study, and had not heard the door open. Nevertheless, I felt a set of eyes on me, and turned around in my chair to see a pale, clean shaven man standing there. The man had grey hair, grey nondescript clothes, and grey eyes that both bore into and through me.

I knew that I was in the presence of Death, despite the fact that he carried neither scythe nor hourglass, and despite being thin, was no skeleton. I stood up with a cry of surprise, and then profound curiosity. For I knew that it was in fact Death, though I knew not how I knew.

He said nothing, but seemed waiting for me to speak. I struggled for something to say before finally settling on:

“You’re an actual person? I always thought you were just a state of being.”

The figure’s mouth twitched into what I can only describe as a faint smile from one unaccustomed to smiling.

“That is perhaps one of the most unique answers I have received from a mortal,” Death told me. “So often I get anger or fear. Occasionally acceptance. Rarely resignation.”

“Then you do meet everyone in their proper time?” I asked.

“From Abel to the firstborn of Egypt. From David and Solomon to the Son of Man himself when he died for all.”

“And now you come for me, angel of death?”

Oddly enough, my strongest feeling at the moment was one of disappointment that I would not be able to give my lecture. Ego ran through my psyche after all. My poor wife, I thought would grieve and then move on, as she must.

“You are not ready then?” he asked.

“Does that ever sway you?” I countered, raising my eyebrows.

He shrugged.

“I know the Lord and Savior, if that’s what you mean,” I continued.

“And how did you come to know him?” asked he.

“When I was young, I was taught his ways by my mother,” I said. “Later, I doubted, perhaps for no other reason than it was my nature to question everything. I determined that there were basically four possibilities: that there was no God, less than one God, one God, or more than one God.

“Of course, no God rendered everything random and meaningless. Multiple gods, like in the pagan myths, fared little better, for those Gods were not creators. They were only a kind of elder race that came from nothing for no reason. As for there being less than a God, like a kind of life force well, how could a force create anything? Or why would it, if everything would just go back into it anyway? I never saw much in the Eastern religions or New Age philosophers. So there must be one God. Creator and creation. We have the record of the bible,

and since the early disciples gave their lives for it, it couldn’t be a lie or delusion. Thus, Jesus is Lord.”

“Very clever,” said he. “To reduce things to numbers seems to be the common factor in all your thinking.”

Whether he mocked me or merely stated fact, I wasn’t sure. So I retorted:

“Hobbes felt that all reason was mathematics: to add or subtract numbers or ideas and draw conclusions accordingly.”

“He did. I spoke with him at length when his time came,” said he.

“Is it my time now?”

“It is. But you do have one more lesson to deliver.”

He held out his hand and I took it. It was cold, but not with the coldness of cadavers so much as the feeling

of something unworldly. Then my study vanished, and I found myself in another place.

II

I looked and found myself in a circular room. Clocks lined the walls, and looking up I saw that there was a rotunda over me, and the rows and rows of clocks went all the way up. A door stood on the other side and in the center of the room was a pedestal with a spherical object, about the size of a basketball

I turned around to see if Death had followed me here. He had indeed, and now could be seen in his true form. Nine feet tall with an inner light, he had four faces, one that resembled a man, one an ox, one a lion and one an eagle. Moreover, he has several sets of wings and multiple eyes. I recognized him immediately as a cherubim, such as the ones Ezekiel had seen in his

vision. How such creatures ever came to be associated with cute babies, I'll never understand.

With a cry, I fell to my feet, but he pulled me back up. "That honor is only due to one," he told me.

I looked up at him and saw that he had once more assumed his grey man form.

"What is this place?" I stammered.

"Beyond time and space." He pointed to the object in the center. "That is all of creation. All worlds, past, present and future. Vast and awe inspiring, yet still infinitely small compared to the Creator."

"No time?"

"Your people are just beginning to grasp that time is not a fixed concept. It flows at different rates in different places and from different vantage points. Here is as God Himself is. Beyond. Timeless. Not old, but

ageless. That's how I, and He, can see all moments of all lives. That's how I can step into time and bring those whose time has come."

He led me closer to the object and I saw that it had several rings, not unlike the inside of a tree trunk. I found that upon focusing I could see each ring up close. Each was in fact its own universe, or timeline, extending from a beginning to an end. I saw suns rise and fall and people live and die. I had to step back and hold my head; it was far more than I could grasp.

"I was Calculon the cherubim of God, and I was fascinated with the creation of his called time," Death continued. "So when man fell and death entered the world, I was selected to be Death, the herald of man's leaving time and entering into eternity, whether heaven…"

He pointed to the door in front of me.

“Or hell.”

He turned and looked over his shoulders. I turned and beheld another door behind me. It appeared to be identical, but I had little time to ponder as he gripped my shoulders again and we were back in my study.

“Gather pen and paper,” Death told me. “You are to accompany me as I retrieve the next few souls whose time has come. You will record what you see and feel and bring it back here, to give your greatest lecture on truth.”

Thrilled, bewildered, and not a little apprehensive, I obeyed, getting several notebooks. Then we were off once more.

III

I found myself walking alongside my companion down the streets of what can only be described as a

primitive village. A dirt road bisected two rows of rough houses made of earth and sod with reed thatched roves. People were gathering near a house at the end of the road.

The people were of a group I had never seen before. Dressed in animal skins, they were golden skinned and generally dark haired and eyed, although a handful had lighter hair and eye colors. Their faces were neither African, Asian nor European, although I could see elements of all three modern groups in them. I perceived that these people must be of an ancient, although robust stock, for they were generally taller and stronger than the people of our own time and place.

They seemed both saddened and worried about something. Whether walking side by side or huddled together in groups, they conversed in low, tense voices. Of course I could understand nothing of what they said,

for it didn’t even remotely resemble English. However, I learned on my journey that whomever we came for, that person I could understand perfectly. I believe it to be one of Death’s abilities that he performed for both of our benefits.

Stepping through the crowd, unaware of our presence, we entered the hut at the end of the road of houses. There on a simple bed of blankets lay a very old woman, breathing heavily. Her face was so lined and her limbs so thin that I marveled she had survived this long. Yet in spite of the age, there was still a regal bearing about her that told me she was a ruler, as well as a motherly bearing that told me she was mother and grandmother to a great many of the people outside.

“Eve,” Death said, taking her hand. “It is time.”

Eve! The Eve of the bible. Mother of our entire race. I stood spellbound as Death gently lifted her to her

feet. As he did so, there was suddenly two of her. One lay with her eyes closed on the mats while the other looked dazed, and stood, her eyes taking in everything that was around her, including the one who held her hand.

“Who are you?” she asked. “I don’t remember having seen you before. Who are your parents? Your skin and clothes look so pale.”

“Perhaps if I appeared in this way,” Death answered.

He resumed the form of Calculon, the mighty cherubim he had been before the world. Eve gave a strangled cry, and tried to bow down, but my companion held on to her arm, preventing her from doing so. Then he resumed his previous guise as the unassuming grey man.

“Are you one of the ones who chased us out of the garden?” she asked. “When I, I…”

She buried her face in her hands and began to cry. Death took her in his arms and held her, trying to give comfort, I realized. I saw more and more that while quite real, neither Death nor the first mother were at all like we pictured them. For the real Eve is no frail, delicate blond woman, despite what the artists often paint. She is mother of all races, not just the northern ones. How I wish more would see that.

I stepped in and put my arms around her as well.

“I am not one of those who made you leave the garden,” Death told Eve. “Those were my fellows.”

“And you?” Eve asked, looking up at me with tear strained eyes.

“I…I’m one of your many times great grandchildren,” I said.

“I didn’t listen to the warning,” she continued. “I thought I could have more when I already had everything. I thought the snake was just another one of God’s miracles. How could I have been so wrong? Knowledge. Knowledge of good and evil, and yes, the knowledge of how to do evil.”

Another person poked her head into the hut. She could only see the corpse of her mother and gave out a loud cry of anguish. Death released Eve and took her hand. I took the other, dazed at the surreal quality of it all. We led her out of the hut.

We walked a few paces, and Eve turned back to look at the crowd.

“My children,” Eve said, although they could neither see nor hear her. They could mourn, however, and did, crying out and embracing one another.

“Forgive me. My sons, don’t abuse or be angry with my daughters because of me. They weren’t there any more than you were. On me only lies the blame.”

She addressed Death. “Why must they suffer disease and death because of me? Why must they know greed, anger and lust? I am punished, and rightly so, but what does it have to do with them?”

“They are not punished for original sin so much as they lack original blessing,” Death replied. “That blessing is what kept sin and death away, and kept the flesh and spirit in harmony. Without it, they are opposed and man falls into an animal state. Worse than animal, for they know cruelty and perversion. So they suffer because you were unable to pass on the blessing, because you can’t pass on what you yourself don’t have.”

“Then there is no hope? No mercy?”

“There is always mercy. And justice. God will not go back on his law, but he will fulfill it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. When you see Him once more.”

“I am to go back to Him?”

A thousand feelings flashed across her face: delight, relief, fear, dread, and many more that I have not the words to describe.

“You are.”

“And Adam? Is he there as well?”

“He and Abel. And all whose heart is right with our Lord.”

She closed her eyes and nodded. “Then I am ready.”

Death took us back to the room. Eve was led into the door with the light.

IV

Our next journey found us in a temple of some sort. An idol of a golden calf was there, and enemy soldiers were jostling it, attempting to move it from its base. No doubt they would take the image, useless now to its worshippers, and melt it down to make sacred objects and images of their own gods.

For I saw that I was in an ancient pagan land. The soldiers carried swords, bows and arrows rather than modern firearms and were long haired and fully bearded. They looked like and indeed were the armies of Assyria as I would learn from the king of the fallen people.

The king’s specter stood over his corpse, having been stabbed to death in this very room, vainly appealing to the golden calf. Now he watched in horror as he saw that his life had ended, and his kingdom was crumbling before his ghostly eyes.

“Hoshea, last king of Israel,” Death hailed. “Your time has come.”

Hoshea, whom I remembered from the biblical account of the kings, looked towards us. “So,” he said, and his voice still had a trace of aristocratic haughtiness, despite his fear. “The prophets’ words have come to pass. They told me to destroy the calf and to only recognize the God of our ancestors, the God of Abraham.”

“Yet you did not,” Death replied. “And now, you go to Him. To the calf, you go not, for it is but a cache of gold, now to be spent by your enemies.”

“They weren’t always so,” Hoshea replied. “Once I was in league with them. When the previous king, Pekah, was in power, they supported me when I moved to kill him. I served under them and paid them tribute, hoping

to keep them from conquering what was left of the Northern kingdom of Israel.

“But paying tribute would not keep them away. So I tried to break away when the Assyrians were having a change in leadership. They came, though, and captured me. I escaped and tried to rally my forces, but…”

He broke off, and gestured to the Assyrians, now carrying off the statue.

“Why didn’t you get rid of it?” I asked.

Hoshea looked back at me, somewhat surprised. “Get rid of it? Why would I do that? It has been here since the days of Jeroboam I, original ruler of the northern kingdom. He recognized that in order to keep Israel from breaking up still more that he needed a way to control the people, or to unify their thoughts, if you like. It really amounts to the same thing.”

“What?”

“Jerusalem had the temple of God, built by Solomon. The wise king saw that religion was a way to keep the people’s minds and hearts united, and obedient. If you hold power over their souls, or seem to, then you have them. My predecessor made the calf gods to do the same. To keep northern Israel under him.”

“And what of the true God?” I demanded. “What of the ten commandments?”

“To have no other Gods before me,” Hoshea recited. “Yes, of course the Lord is first. And what then? There are other gods too, both real and imaginary. Why not work with them if it’s useful to?”

“I see you are more of a pagan then,” I remarked, growing to dislike him the more we spoke. In particular I disliked his brazen use of religion to try and control his

people. Especially since in my own age, nonbelievers accuse all religion of that very thing. The sad irony is that the true God must hate it as much as they do.

“What would you have me do?” Hoshea argued back. “The Lord was with the house of David, in the southern kingdom, as the prophets made clear. We in the north had no choice but to either make our own way, or rejoin the south and submit to whomever sat on David’s throne, whether good or bad.”

“But to deliberately take people’s need for God, for spiritual comfort, for guidance, and to twist it into thought control…”

“Not everyone. All religions have four different types of members. There are the nominal ones, who barely associate with it. There are the hypocrites, who only pretend. There are the fanatics, who believe but also advocate forcing their beliefs on others, and finally

there are the genuine believers. Those are the only ones I'm really 'controlling' and who are useful as a hedge of protection from enemies. The fanatic, while useful, is too volatile to control, and the other two don't come when called."

"You are an evil man, King Hoshea."

Hoshea frowned, angry that I, a common man, should ever question one of his illustriousness.

"Evil you say? Well, what if I am? From what I've seen the main difference between evil and good is one of courage. Good sees the world has gone awry, and only laments and prays. Evil sees the world and decides to make it into the way it should be. Evil acts. Evil pushes men forward on the path they should go, while good only asks that they do what's right.

“Everything I’ve done, from the killing of Pekah, to paying off Assyria, to rebelling with Egypt, to the golden calf, I have done to make Israel strong. To make me strong. I don’t apologize. If that’s evil, then I am completely, irredeemably, evil!”

I shuddered with anger, and wanted to say more, but Death stepped in between us.

“We must tarry here no longer, King Hoshea,” he said. “You go not to the calf, for there is no such being. You go to the Lord, to explain your machinations and manipulations.”

V

“Intaphrenes,” Death called out. “Your time has come.”

We were standing in an ancient Persian mansion. Our latest charge had just been stabbed to death by the

king’s soldiers who had made their way by night. As the nobleman, Intaphrenes rose in spirit and left behind his body, he turned to behold the soldiers leading away his family, likely to their own deaths. For where we were now was clearly no place of mercy.

“So it is,” Intaphrenes answered. His voice was angry, but he was not angry with us so much as with the situation. “Darius is indeed a traitor. Yet he will reap the rewards, while I have only the punishment.”

Darius the Great is well known to history. After Cyrus, he is perhaps the best known of Persian kings. All this I knew from Herodotus and other sources, but wanted to hear a firsthand account. So I asked him what he meant.

“Who are you that I should tell you?” he demanded.

“I am a companion to him who is to guide you to your judgment,” I replied. “As to why speak with me well, why wouldn’t you?”

He snorted. “Very well. It all began when Bardia sat on the throne of his father.”

Herodotus calls Bardia Smerdis.

“Darius, a distant cousin of the royal family, and one with ambition, came to me and several other nobles. He claimed that Bardia wasn’t who he said he was, but an impostor, who just happened to look like the king’s son. He swore it was our duty to band together and overthrow the pretender.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“We discussed who should rule in the impostor’s place. One of us, Otanes, advocated democracy, like the

Athenians do, a rule by the many. Megabyzus suggested that we rule together. An oligarchy, or rule by the few.

“But Darius dismissed both plans. Democracy, he convinced us, was little better than mob rule. Oligarchy, on the other hand, he contended would only end in infighting among the rulers. Eventually only one would remain. Why not then simply start with rule by the one in the first place? Why not set up a monarchy?”

“It would be obvious to even the dimmest fool that he meant himself. But he proposed a contest, one that would let the great god Ahura Mazda decide which of us would rule. At dawn, he had us all face the rising sun mounted on horseback. The first horse that neighed would be seen as the one divinely chosen to be king.”

“But he, Darius, had a plan to win, didn’t he?” I said.

“Yes. But how would you know that?”

“We are outside of time,” Death said. “We know the past, present, and future of your kingdom.”

“Ah. So then tell me, will Darius be repaid for his treachery?”

“He will go the way of all men,” Death said. “In his own time. More than that, I am not at liberty to say. But please, finish your story for my companion. He is a scholar and would hear of your end in your own words.”

“Well, of course Darius’ horse neighed first. So he was chosen to be king. And we successfully toppled Bardia, or the man impersonating him, whichever you like.”

I should tell the reader that Herodotus contended that the man Darius overthrew was an imposter. Modern historians, however, note that he accused multiple rivals and enemies to be impostors, so that it may well have

been a lie. Ambitious, power hungry men rarely care whether their ascension is fully honest or not.

“Later I heard that Darius’ slave Oebares, had put the scent of a mare under the nose of his master’s horse. So that was why it neighed first. Worse, there were rumors that the Bardia we had overthrown wasn’t an imposter but the real king. If that was true, then we were the real false rulers. Or rather, Darius was.

“I went to his palace to try and confront him, but his guards barred my way. I fought and wounded them, and then fled. That was my undoing. Darius sent his men to kill me, as you just saw.”

“Now we must go,” Death told him.

Intaphrenes shook his fist at the guards, who were just now getting out of sight. “You will answer for your misdeeds too, Darius! Even you will not live forever.

One day, you will stand where I now do, and what will you do then?”

VI

We found ourselves in a sunny, well lit open area. Looking around, I saw columns and ancient buildings all around me. A crowd was there, shouting or chanting something. Of course, I couldn’t understand the language, but I could make out the words ‘Artemis’ and ‘Ephesians’.

I looked at my guide questioningly, and he nodded. “Yes. We are in Ephesus,” he said. “It is what you would call the first century. A silversmith named Demetrius has started a riot, for he fears that the Way, preached by Paul, will both end his trade in idols and dishonor his goddess.”

“I remember the account,” I said. “It’s in Acts. But I see no riot.”

“Wait,”

He pointed and I saw another group of men angrily approaching. The shouts continued and I saw some of the first crowd pulling out clubs. The same chant continued and it took a more threatening tone. To the side, an older man was trying to enter the fray. Another person was holding him back, and the two argued, though about something different from the crowd’s argument.

“Paul,” Death said, identifying the man who wanted to join the brewing fracas. “He wants to try to calm the people, but his friend recognizes that there will be no peace today. His time comes a little later. Then he will have eternity.”

“You already came for him?” I asked For I knew that he was beyond time, and yet somehow figured that he plied his trade more or less in an order that we would expect, that is, he would have come for the more ancient dead ‘before’ the modern ones, as they related to linear time. Yet as he spoke of Paul, his face seemed to take on an expression of remembrance, thus prompting my question.

“Yes. I can get people and bring them from their death moment to their God for judgment in any order,” Death said. “I have all eternity to do so. I get to the more interesting people first, for I enjoy talking with them. I also try to get the more unpleasant ones out of the way. Finally, I get the regular, unremarkable ones.”

“I won’t ask where I rank,” I said, although of course I was.

He didn’t reply, for I saw that the fighting had begun. Blows were exchanged, blood was spilled, and Paul’s companions hurried him away. People began to fall, and as people died, I saw their souls rise from their bodies, identical in appearance to their earthly shells. Each one stood over their body, dazed, confused, dismayed, angry, and even accepting.

Some of them had an image of Death appear, take them by the hand, and disappear with them. I realized that Death had already stepped into time for some of them. Others waited, although they too would be brought out of time into judgment at the same moment. Death simply hadn’t visited the moment enough yet.

To one of these, Death, or rather, Death when he was with me, went. I followed, taking out a notebook to record what would transpire.

“Laertes of Ephesus,” Death hailed. “Your time has come.”

He looked at us, and took a step back. “Thanatos?” he asked. “Is it you? Or are you Mors?” He looked us over. “You don’t have the head of a jackal, so I see you aren’t Anubis. The Greek gods over the Egyptians then. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

“Call me what you will,” Death replied. “But I am no God. Only one may claim that title.”

Laertes looked over his shoulder with dismay. “Not like those troublemakers said, I hope. But look here. He said that our gods weren’t gods at all. Only manmade objects. He implied, no practically accused us of selling a lie just to make money! The very idea. I mean, of course we got rich making shrines to the goddess. But that doesn’t mean we don’t believe and worship. That’s

the way with men and gods. We give them honor, and they give us prosperity. It's a partnership, a symbiosis."

He looked as other Christians met their end. "Except they don't believe that," he continued. "That Jewish man from Tarsus, that Paul, he says there's only one god and that he's not a partner but a creator. And a master. We always found the Jews crazy, like the Platonists, They think there's only one God too. Nonsense. The world's always been and always will be. Gods, men, we're all thrown here by fate. How can one claim to be behind it all?"

"Something doesn't come from nothing," I spoke up. "And time has a beginning, as does the world."

He seemed to notice me for the first time. "Who are you?" He asked. "Not another who died. You look different."

“No. I’m his companion,” I said, pointing to Death.

“So you think there’s one behind everything too? Are you one of the Jews? Or are you with Paul, who says that God had a son that we have to believe in?”

“Yes. I’m a Christian.”

“Haven’t heard the term,” Laertes grumbled, and I remembered that it was still a new term at this point, still mostly used around Antioch, although it would soon come to mean all believers.

“But look here, if your God has a Son, doesn’t that just mean he’s just one of the race of gods?” Laertes asked. “Zeus, Aphrodite, and Apollo have all had children over the years with mortals. Wouldn’t yours have done the same? Why all this talk of being above and beyond and maker of everything? Even Zeus can’t claim that.”

“The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three in one,” I said. “None of them ‘had’ the others.”

“How’s that? Is it one, two or three gods you’re worshipping?”

“There is one. Just as a cube is both one thing and six sides, so is God one being and three persons at once.”

Laertes waved a dismissive hand at us. “Philosophy. That’s not for real life. I make objects of worship for Artemis. She gives me prosperity. Gods and men work together, and great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

“You won’t convince him of anything,” Death told me. “He died at a moment in time, and he stays as he was in that moment when he moves out of time into eternity.”

“Why?” I asked.

“The difference between time and eternity is change. In time, things change and time moves forward. Time is motion and change. But eternity isn’t time going on and on, as some mistakenly think. It is beyond time, and thus beyond change. It is a moment where nothing is ever different, and time stops flowing. So the damned have no hope of redemption, and the blessed have no fear of apostasy. They are both past the point of reality that has time and change.”

“More philosophy,” Laertes grumbled. “Am I going to Elysium or not?”

“Come,” Death told him, holding out his hand. Laertes took it and they both began to fade. I grasped Death’s shoulder.

As I looked around one last time at the fading riot, I received a shock. Another figure was moving through the crowd. It was neither one of the living rioters nor

one of the dead being escorted by one of the appearances of Death. This figure was dressed entirely in black and wore a porcelain mask. Moreover the mask was in the image of a stereotypical devil. With goatee, horns and leering expression, the mask on the figure seemed to belittle and mock what was going on around it. It seemed to me that the wearer seemed amused by the pathos and seemed focused on some of the dead over others.

Then, he turned to look at us. I could see no hint of the face beyond the mask, of course, but could feel his awareness of us. I felt a feeling of fear, dread and disgust well up in me, as though I would be sick. Then we disappeared and were in the room with the clocks.

VII

Death led Laertes to the door on the far side.

“You will wait here,” he said without turning around. “I must take my charge to meet his maker.”

He opened the door, which had a bright light behind it, led Laertes through and shut it behind him. This time, he seemed gone longer, so I had more of a chance to explore the room.

I looked around the room at all of the clocks. Some moved fast, others slow, and some barely at all. I remembered Death asserting that time was really motion and change, and that eternity was beyond and thus unchanging. I wondered how long the errand would take and how long I would be here. Indeed, would it be for any length of time at all?

I went to the far door and gave it a tug out of curiosity. I didn’t open, although I saw no lock. The

other door I had no desire to attempt. After another time, a minute on one of the clocks, but an hour on another, I went over to the object on the table, the ‘whole of creation’.

I saw a panoramic view of stars and galaxies, with bursts of light at either end, so that I couldn’t see clearly either the beginning or the end. However, I could look more closely at the stars in the middle and pick out the Earth. I could then focus on Earth and see a jumble of sights and sounds. I saw the Earth cooling from a molten rock to form a living world. I saw animals and our first ancestors. I saw the rise and fall of all the civilizations of history along with those that history had forgotten.

I could see that all moments in time were here, that they always existed from this vantage point, although we only experienced one fleeting moment at a time. This of

course, was the present, and was always falling away into the past and being replaced by the future flowing towards us. We could see and feel but one instant at a time. But to be in the past didn't not mean a loss of existence. It was all still here, to be seen.

Each moment, when I focused on it, was a type of humming or buzzing thing. Like a hummingbird hovering or a string vibrating after being plucked. To pick out one moment and try to convey to the reader what just one moment was like proved too difficult for me, used as I was to motion, indeed, to time passing.

Watching time move in this way proved far easier. I saw people born and die, saw them love and hate, saw them awake and asleep, saw them play and work and then pray and worship.

All throughout time I saw little flashes, like the light at the beginning and end of time. Only smaller. The

lights, although invisible in the moments, could be seen providing healing and comfort when viewed here. I wondered if it wasn't the answers to prayer.

I heard the door open again, and turned back around. Death was returning, alone, through the door. Of his charge, I know not what happened nor was I ever told. I suspect that everyone's judgment is between them and God.

"You're examining the times of the world," he noted, seeing me next to the object.

"Yes. I hope there is no harm in it," I said, somewhat chagrined. He hadn't given me permission, but I didn't touch it or try to manipulate it in any way.

"None. You see every moment that is, or as you would say, was, is and will be."

“Yes.” I paused. “Tell me, the fact that it’s all here, and that you and God can see all…does that mean that there is no freedom of choice after all? That what will be will be no matter what and there’s no real free will in it?”

“Just because there are spectators doesn’t mean that the players’ actions aren’t controlled by them,” Death answered. “Nor do the spectators necessarily have control either, although sports fans will always shout at the game.”

Despite the gravity of the place and the conversation, I laughed. I can tell the reader that Death indeed has a sense of humor.

“As it is though, while God allows free will and natural law to take their courses, he still has intervened where he sees fit. You can see those interventions first hand.”

“The points of light.”

“Yes.”

“What about the lights at the beginning and end of time?”

“They are clear to God Himself, but not to you or me. Haven’t you heard that of the last day, no knows but the father who is in heaven? I know not what or when the end times will be any more than you, although I will eventually.”

“But I thought you stepped into time to gather souls in a non linear way,” I argued.

“Yes and no. When I began my work, very little of time was revealed. Only a sliver between the two great lights of beginning and end. Slowly, the light at the end recedes and more of the timeline is clear to me. So while I have come for most in the distant past, I have not

yet gone to what you would call the future. Nor can I take you to the future."

I looked at the object again. Focusing my attention to the end light, I looked to the area before it. I saw that it was indeed slowly receding and a few more moments became visible. Of the moments still hidden, I only saw the light.

"Where do we go next then?" I asked. "And to whom?"

"Come and see."

VIII

Death and I stood in a prison cell. It was dark and damp, and occupied by a single malnourished prisoner. Around us, the guards and other prisoners spoke in Russian. So I learned that we were in Moscow.

The prisoner breathed in a labored manner when we came up to him. Soon, his head rolled to the side and the breathing stopped. The spirit rose from the body.

“Ivan Leshyovich,” Death hailed.

Ivan, the prisoner, looked at us in horror. “No,” he whispered. “No! I can’t be dead! The work! The work must continue.”

“What work is that?” I asked.

“The work of the revolution. The Bolsheviks. We were preparing to topple the czar and his oppressive rule. I was spreading the word when I was arrested and put in this hole. For over a month, I’ve waited for release. The work must go on.”

“You have caught pneumonia and succumbed,” Death told him. “I am sorry but for you the work is done.”

“What did you hope to gain?” I asked, remembering how the communist Soviets ruled this land for three quarters of a century. Fear of war had dominated it, until it toppled under another revolution.

“For all of history there have been two ways to direct economic affairs,” Ivan answered. “Either business and wealth is controlled by the few, at the expense of the many, or the many share what is to be had. Capitalism versus socialism, or communism if you wish the most extreme form of sharing the wealth. For too long it has been the few over the many. Now, the many will have their way.”

“It won’t change what you hope it will,” I told him. “To divide up wealth, you will need people to do it. People in control. And they will never be able to resist the temptation to misuse power. It will be back to where it started. Haves and have nots.”

“No. You’re wrong,” Ivan protested. “The work will continue. And I won’t go with you, do you hear? I won’t!”

Death made a gesture, and Ivan froze. I blinked and then looked around. The sights and sounds of the prison had all frozen stiff. Death and I were the only ones moving.

“What happened?” I asked him.

“You know that I step into and out of time,” Death said. Now I have stepped further in. Specifically we are in only one moment, as opposed to passing through several moments. That’s what you really do when travelling through so called real time.”

He walked forward and reached out for Ivan Leshyovich. He picked him up and slung him over his shoulder.

“But why?” I asked.

“So I can retrieve him without fighting,” Death said. “He is not the first to resist my coming. Nor will he be the last. Governments, economics, people. They never really change. Oh, they make adjustments in their organization. But always one of the three basic rules or one of the two basic economies. There is nothing new under the sun. It is not how many or how few rule, nor is it how many or how few have the wealth that’s the problem. The problem is that man has fallen from God. Only a return to God will ever put things right.”

I followed him in silence as we found ourselves in the timeless room. Death took the still limp form of Ivan through the heavenly door.

IX

I found myself in a lunchroom. A man was seated, eating. A second man came and asked to sit beside him.

“Sure. I don’t really like eating alone either. You’re new here?”

“Yeah. I’m Hugh Skelton.”

“Tom Bowen.”

They shook hands and began chatting. I looked at Death in confusion. “Why are we here?”

“You will see,” came the reply. He put his arm on my shoulder and the scene blurred away. When it cleared again, I saw the same lunchroom again. Tom, Hugh and a few others were there.

“So the company dance party is this weekend,” one of the men was telling the group. “This Friday night, and open to all couples.”

“Sarah and I will be there,” Tom said. “She loves to dance.” He turned to Hugh. “How about Laurette, Hugh?”

“Six months have passed,” Death said. “Tom and Hugh have become friends. However…”

“You’re assuming she’s real Tom,” another guy called from the table. A few other people snickered.

“Oh shut up Russell,” Tom said.

Hugh smiled slightly. “Of course she’s real. But I’m afraid she’s not much of a dancer. Besides I’m going to be visiting family this weekend.”

“Ah. That’s too bad. Sarah really wanted to meet her.”

“Maybe another time.”

Death gripped my shoulder and the scene changed again. Hugh and Tom were leaving a movie theater. On Tom's arm walked a pretty woman who had the swollen abdomen of pregnancy. The theater had an old fashioned facade with King Kong on the marquee. This was the first indication to me of the time we were in.

"Crazy movie," Tom laughed. "Sorry Laurette couldn't make it again."

"Yeah. She isn't feeling well," Hugh said.

"Any children?" Sarah asked. "We're expecting our first."

"No, I'm afraid that's not on the table for us," Hugh replied. "Congratulations for you though."

"Have you been together long?" Sarah asked.

“Most of my life. We were high school sweethearts and got married shortly after graduation. She’s the only woman I dated or needed to.”

“That sounds really sweet.”

“It is, but it’s not always easy.”

“Well, how about some lunch sometime?” she asked.

“We’ll see.”

Another jump ahead and we found ourselves in a cemetery. We were alone except for two people. Hugh Skelton was kneeling before a gravestone, weeping softly. A woman knelt beside him, a lovely young woman with red hair and bright eyes. I supposed it to be Laurette, and wondered that I hadn’t seen her before now.

I also wondered who it was they were mourning. Had Tom died? Or a parent? He hadn’t seemed upset

before. I walked up slowly and reverently even though I knew they couldn’t see either me or my companion.

To my shock, I saw that the tombstone read Laurette Skelton 1901-1930. I looked back over at the couple again, and saw that Laurette’s form was lighter in color and texture, and that I could see through her. Then, the truth became clear to me.

Footsteps sounded, and I looked up. So did the couple, living and dead. At the cemetery gates, I saw Tom running, holding a coat.

“Hugh? You left your coat at work. I was rushing to catch up…”

He stopped, and his jaw dropped. Hugh quickly got up, looking like a man caught in some act. And so he had been. Caught in a lie.

“Hugh…” Tom couldn’t finish. He saw the inscription and knew too.

“I was just…Laurette…” Hugh stammered. Fresh tears welled up in his eyes.

Tom approached, and wordlessly handed over the coat.

“I was just…we’ll go to dinner tonight…you, me, Sarah, and…”

“Sure Hugh,” Tom said, and he put a compassionate arm around his friend’s shoulders. “Sure.”

They walked away, these two friends, one broken and grieving, and the other supporting and forgiving.

Laurette watched them go, her arm outstretched, her own eyes filled with compassion for the husband who for three years hadn’t come to grips with his greatest loss.

She turned, and seemed to become aware of us for the first time. “You,” she said to my companion and conductor.

“Yes, Laurette Skelton. Is your business finished now?” Death asked.

“I don’t know. Is it?”

“Your husband has friends now, and those friends know the truth. So you will no longer have to remain here for him,” Death told her.

“It won’t be easy for him,” Laurette said, looking back at the cemetery gates. “I was the only person he ever loved, and his only real friend. When I died in that car wreck, I couldn’t just leave him.”

“I know,” Death said, and to the surprise of the reader, no doubt, I saw compassion in his eyes too. Once more, I saw that he was not the uncaring detached Grim

Reaper of folklore. He does what he does because he has a care and love for God's creation, both the abstract space-time and the specific, including a young woman who couldn't move on until her husband had someone else to look after him.

"I allowed you to remain here on Earth for a time because you had unfinished business. Sometimes I am allowed to prolong the dead meeting their Creator, if a reason exists. But even I cannot prolong the inevitable forever. All must stand before God."

"I understand," Laurette said. "I'm ready now."

The three of us found ourselves back in the timeless room. Death took Laurette through the door of light, and I was left alone once more.

X

The next journey took us to the back alleys of some great city. It was dark, but the grayish tint of dawn could be seen. Moreover the buildings, while run down, looked familiar in layout and design, so I knew I was in a more recent time before Death confirmed it.

“New York City, 1941,” he said. “The day that will live in infamy. However, our business here concerns nothing so large.”

A haggard, disheveled man ran past us, quickly glancing over his shoulder as he did so. He carried a briefcase in one hand and wore a long trench coat. We followed, and soon a light snow began to fall. Because of the early morning there were few people on the road, and the only building on the block that had any lights on was a building that had a sign identifying it as a homeless shelter.

The man ran into it, and looked around. A step led down to a desk where an elderly priest sat. To the left was an open doorway into a cafeteria and no one else was in sight. The priest looked up, and squinted with his dark eyes, apparently due to fading eyesight.

“Good morning,” he began. “I’m afraid the other guests are still asleep and breakfast won’t be served for an hour…”

The man pulled out a revolver from his trench coat pocket. He pointed it at the priest, who gasped and fell silent. For a moment, the only sound was a radio going off in the cafeteria. I faintly heard the voice of FDR announce the attacks on Pearl Harbor. Soon, America would be joining the rest of the world in war.

“Lock the door, father, and don’t make a sound,” the man said finally.

The priest complied, while the man covered him. When the front door was securely bolted, he motioned the gun in the direction of the cafeteria, indicating where the priest should go. After the priest sat down, the man with the gun followed, looked around, shut off the radio, and turned off the light.

The room was now only lit by a dim auxiliary light. The man sat at a table closer to the door so that the priest couldn't bolt. Eying the older man carefully, the man in the trench coat put the gun on the table, but still well within his reach. Setting the briefcase on the table, he opened it to reveal stacks of money.

The priest's eyes widened. "My word," he whispered. "Can it be? Are you Jim Valens, the bank robber?"

"You keep with the news, do you father?" the man, Jim, retorted.

“It’s hard not to have heard of you. So you did have a falling out with the rest of your gang, then?”

“How did you know about that?”

“One of them was captured yesterday. He claimed that you took more than your fair share of the latest robbery. That some of the others were looking for you and…”

“Shhh,” Jim said, grabbing the gun and looking out the curtained window. More snow was falling, but otherwise, he could see or hear nothing. With a sigh, he sat down again.

“You have name, father?”

“Father Vincent Alighieri. I…I’m a scholar for the archdiocese. Sometimes I come to the shelter to volunteer.”

“Lucky you.”

Father Vincent shrugged. “Sometimes one is right where one needs to be.”

“Yeah? Well, don’t try to convert me, father. I’ve other things on my mind right now.”

“Yes, well…I’ve always thought most of my brothers go about that from the wrong end.”

“How’s that?”

It was an odd answer, so the father continued. “Most Christians call out others for non Christian behavior when the people they’re talking to never professed Christianity in the first place. It does no good to appeal to the bible when people don’t believe its authority in the first place.”

“Interesting idea,” Jim said, in spite of himself.

“Even in scripture, Jesus offers salvation first to the sinner. Only with the Pharisees, the teachers of the law

does he discuss behavior, for they are the ones who should've known how to do good. Of course," the father glanced at the briefcase. "Even the sinners are told to go and sin no more."

Jim slowly shut the briefcase, and began to pace. He kept one eye on the priest and the other on the sliver of approaching daylight peering through the curtain.

"So you think, "Jim said at last. "How do you know? All those old documents are copies of copies, so far removed from the originals that there's no way to trust that what you have is accurate."

"Hmmm. I would disagree with that," Father Vincent replied. "We have more copies of the New Testament than any other document. Written closer to the original date and better preserved than any other. Besides, the apostles' martyrdom alone speaks to the truth."

A hard knock sounded on the door, and Jim got to his feet. He grabbed his gun, and waited tensely. The knock repeated, louder and faster this time.

“Open up, Jim,” a voice called. “We know you’re in there! The tracks gave you away!”

Jim swore, but didn’t answer. He closed his eyes, and muttered to himself. The priest remained still as well.

A crash sounded as the door was kicked in. Two men entered, guns drawn. They saw both Jim and Father Vincent in the cafeteria, and smiled thinly.

“I knew it,” the first one said.

“You’ve taken what’s ours, Jim,” the second one added. “Looks like it’s over.”

“No, wait,” Jim replied. “Take the money. Just…”

The first man shot Jim. Father Vincent cried out, and was shot dead as well.

“No witnesses,” the first remarked to the second.

“Right,” he said. He grabbed the briefcase, and they both ran out.

Death and I waited as homeless men ran down the stairs into the cafeteria, awakened by the noise. They saw the murdered men and one ran for the phone to call the police. A few others glanced at the open door while most looked on in shock and talked amongst themselves as they tried to fathom what had happened.

Death stepped through the crowd. I followed as the spirits of the dead men rose from their bodies. My companion turned his attention to the robber.

“Jim Valens. Come with me. Your time has come,” Death said.

Jim followed as Death turned and walked out the door. I walked beside the dazed spirit and he looked over his shoulder. Death, stepping into another moment, was guiding the spirit of Father Vincent away.

“What? Two of them?” he wondered aloud.

“No, Just stepping into and out of time,” I told him.

“I don’t understand. I don’t…am I dead?”

“Yes you are,” Death said. He had stepped and gestured out to the open street. Jim and I stepped out into the still falling snow. We saw his old tracks heading in as well as the fresh ones of his fleeing killers.

“Are you the Grim Reaper?” he asked tensely.

“I have been called that among other things,” Death said.

We walked down the cold street, although we ourselves weren't especially cold. I forgot to mention that, being dead, a lot of feelings were absent or blunted, like touch and temperature. I could feel my own footsteps, but the sound, even when I stomped, was muffled. Moreover whatever weather was around us produced little more than a slight tingle. I could tell precipitation was happening around me at the moment, but didn't get wet or cold.

Jim cried out, and drew back. Another figure had stepped onto the street. It wasn't a living person, however, but the figure in the devil mask. Although Death still led the way, both Jim and I felt the presence of a palpable evil that both repulsed us and made us want to follow hm. I felt it was one of the figure's powers working on us, but Death stood his ground, and

prevented us from running either away or towards the figure.

“This one is not yours anymore,” Death told him. “He whispered a prayer of repentance, of petition. The priest reminded him of what he had long forgotten.”

The figure paused, hesitated, and then continued to approach more aggressively.

“Begone!” Death repeated, and he took a step towards the figure. While he neither showed his cherubim form nor any other physical change, he seemed to be larger somehow, more formidable. The figure felt it too, for suddenly it was gone. Not in a puff of smoke or fade, but in the blink of an eye, he vanished. He may as well have never been there, for he left no trace.

Jim collapsed to his knees and I looked at our guide in wonder.

“You mean, you are stronger than him?” I asked.

“Yes. Not even he can snatch away what belongs to God. I see to that. For my strength is but a gift from Him.”

“And yet, it’s said that sin and death are no more in the life to come. But everything I’ve seen makes me think you’re good, not evil.”

Death turned to face us. I noted that for the briefest moment, his eyes were downcast. He helped Jim back to his feet.

“I have my price to pay as well,” he replied. “Do not ask; you will learn in time.”

“How did you know my prayers? I didn’t say it aloud,” Jim asked him.

“God hears, nevertheless,” came Death’s answer.

“It’s so strange.”

“You have no idea,” I remarked.

XI

I asked Death about salvation after he had escorted Jim Valens to his fate.

“I believe about salvation coming through grace, not works,” I began. “But my people would see something disingenuous in the person who repents in his last moments.”

“It is because salvation isn’t earned by meeting a certain number of good works,” Death said. “If it was, where would the line be drawn? What of those who are a few short, or who start late in life but do genuinely start? No, more would not be saved in this way. There would

still be many who would not do enough to be considered ‘good’ and none who meet God’s perfection.”

“And either way, there would be those who accuse God of unfairness,” I mused. “I supposed the best thing would be for God to look at the overall heart.”

“That is precisely what God does,” Death replied. “To make Christ, the Son, lord of your life is to explicitly and indisputably put yourself on His side. You no longer are for yourself.”

“What of those who never heard of Jesus or Israel or the bible?” I asked.

“They are judged by God as he will,” Death said. “But they are no more saved by their deeds than you are. Know that if they are saved, they too are covered by Christ, though they knew him not by name. And know that he loves each human more than any mortal could.”

Then I asked him about ghosts.

“Are all of them where they are by your leave?” I asked. “I always thought that there was no lingering after death, and yet you said you allowed Laurette Skelton to stay and comfort her husband for a time.”

“Sometimes if there is unfinished business I can,” Death repeated. “Other times, the enemy will try and keep the souls of the wicked on Earth to spread fear and misery.”

“The devil?”

“Yes.”

“I…I think I saw him,” I said, remembering the masked figure. “In Ephesus.”

“He was there,” Death confirmed. “He will even oppose the servants of God. Even me. He tried to sway me before the world began, and will keep trying to its end.”

“I wonder. Why is he allowed? Yes, I know about testing our faith and all that, but why isn’t he restrained more?”

“But he is. The world would be a burned out cinder if he was not,” Death said, a trace of sternness in his voice. “Believe me, such is his malice. Such is his desire, to corrupt and to destroy; to burn the Earth and drag all of the faithful down with him is his only desire. As you will see.”

A touch and blurring of my vision, and I found myself in the next place where we were to escort someone on their final journey.

It was an office where a man sat at a desk, clearly waiting for someone else to arrive. I looked out the window and saw bars. I realized that it was a prison, and I was in the warden's office.

The door opened, and a heavyset middle aged man wearing an apron and hairnet entered. He had the grizzled look of someone who had spent his entire adult life doing physical unskilled labor. Still, there was both intelligence and kindness in his eyes and I felt an instinctive liking for him.

"Mr. Brown. Excuse me, Arthur. Thank you for coming so promptly," the warden said.

"Yes, sir. What's going on?" the man, Arthur, asked.

The warden bit his lip uncomfortably. "You have been one of the cooks here for a long time."

"Twenty years, sir."

“Yes. Your reputation has spread, not only throughout the prison, but even to other prisons. How you often volunteer to serve last meals to death row inmates. How you celebrate every release with a special meal. You’ve eaten with them from time to time.”

“The people here, many of them at any rate, have done bad things. I don’t deny that. But I feel that sometimes an act of kindness can make all the difference in some of their lives.”

“Arthur…you had a son, didn’t you?” the warden asked, leaning forward. “He was killed by a drunk driver.”

“Yes,” Arthur said softly. “The driver was charged with manslaughter. He’s here now, of all places.”

“I know. Mr. Caswell.” The warden pulled out a file. “I wanted to tell you, he’s been paroled. He’s leaving the day after tomorrow.”

A muscle in Arthur’s cheek twitched, but he didn’t reply.

“You’ve never seen him since you came here,” the warden said. “I heard you made it a point not to.”

“Not a day goes by that I don’t think about my boy, sir. I’m a Christian so I have to forgive him. I have to. But no, I haven’t trusted myself to visit with him. I honestly don't know what I’d say or do.”

“Well. Mr. Caswell wants to meet with you tomorrow,” the warden said. “I didn’t know what to tell him. I think he may want to try and apologize, to make peace with you. He’s talked with the chaplain a lot over

the course of his incarceration. I don’t know. I told him it would be entirely up to you.”

Arthur’s hands curled into fists at his side, involuntarily. He released them, but the warden still noticed.

“Arthur…look, I can’t tell you what to do. I can’t imagine what it feels like. No one who hasn’t been through something like that could.”

“No parent should have to outlive their child,” Arthur replied. “That’s an old cliché but it’s so true.”

“You don’t have to make any decision now. Why don’t you think it over first?”

The warden stood and shook Arthur’s hand. “We all only wish the best for you. Everyone here, even the inmates, think highly of you. You’re a good man, and

whatever decision you make will be the right one. I'm sure."

Arthur's mouth opened, but he couldn't speak. He only nodded and turned to go. Death and I followed him out of the office, as the cook made his way back down to the kitchen.

I thought about how he must feel and realized that I couldn't any more than the warden could. While people often talk of empathy, I don't think such a thing is really possible. We can and should feel sympathy, compassion and love for others, but can we ever know what it's like to be someone else? I don't believe we can.

Arthur made his way back to the kitchen and began putting some trays of bacon that had been laid out into the oven. Evidently the next meal would be a breakfast. With a sigh, he saw to his duties and tried to distract himself by turning up the volume on a small radio.

President Reagan was calling for the Berlin wall to be torn down.

“Hey Brown,” a voice called.

I turned to see another man, the janitor, coming down the hallway and into the kitchen.

“What is it, Glenn?” Arthur asked.

“I heard about Caswell,” he replied.

Arthur grunted. “News travels fast.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re not really going to meet with him, are you?”

Arthur sighed and sat on a chair. “Forgiveness. If anything’s easier said than done, it’s that.” He looked up. “What are you doing here, Glenn? It’s not time to

pick up the trash. And I don't have any dishes to help with."

"Putting down rat poison. See?" He held up a can of the stuff that had been on the cart he had been pushing.

Arthur made a face. "There are no rats in my kitchen. Get that stuff out of here."

Glenn licked his lips. "Yeah. Problem is, not all rats are four legged, are they?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Brown, you've been good to all of us prisoners. And we notice whether you realize it or not."

He put the rat poison on a shelf.

"What are you doing? I told you…"

“I know, I know. But maybe keep it around for a day or so. Just in case. I’ll pick it up later. See you later, Brown.”

Glenn wheeled his cart away and went down the hall before Arthur could say any more. The cook looked away, deep in thought.

A moment later, someone else entered. A slight chill came into the air and I saw none other than the figure in the devil mask. I backed away, closer to Death, not even caring for the irony that I found it safer near him. But the figure ignored us and approached Arthur.

The latter couldn’t see any of us, as far as I could tell. Gently, almost tenderly, the figure put his hands on either side of Brown’s head. He then moved the man’s gaze to rest upon the can of rat poison on the shelf. Then he left, again not paying any attention to us. I

looked down the hall a moment later, but the figure was gone by now.

“He still has a choice,” Death told me. “There is always a choice.”

The scene changed and we were standing in the cafeteria. Arthur and Mr. Caswell were eating a simple meal of steak and potatoes. They sat across from one another saying nothing at the moment. A guard stood at the door, on the off chance that things would turn violent.

“Thank you for seeing me sir,” Caswell ventured. “I do appreciate it.

Arthur nodded, but didn’t speak. Caswell took a few more bites before continuing. Arthur looked over his shoulder, back towards the kitchen.

“I’ve been talking to the chaplain lately,” Caswell continued. “He’s been telling me about Jesus, and forgiveness of sins.”

He looked at Arthur. “Believe me sir, I can’t tell you how sorry I am. I was drunk, I made a stupid mistake. I never wanted to hurt anyone.”

“Right.”

Caswell took a drink of water. Then he slammed it down, making Arthur jump and the guard startle.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” Tears filled his eyes. “Look, can’t you say anything? Forgive me, cuss me out, but say something!”

Arthur looked into the other man’s eyes. “Finish your meal.”

Caswell's face fell even further, if possible. But he obeyed. Arthur put a hand over his heart for a minute. Then he continued to eat himself.

"I think we're wrong to say 'that's okay' when we forgive," Arthur said presently. Caswell looked up, a faint glimmer of hope in his eyes. "It isn't okay, the act I mean. Better to just tell people they're forgiven, even if it sounds patronizing."

"Will you then?"

"You left some potatoes," Arthur noted. Caswell scooped them into his mouth, not about to argue.

When he finished, he looked at Arthur once more. The older man had started to sweat, and he wiped his brow with his sleeve. With another look over his shoulder, he stood. Caswell stood as well.

"Yes," Arthur said. "I will forgive you now."

Caswell moved in to give him a hug, but Arthur extended his hand instead. They shook and the guard then took the prisoner out.

Arthur continued to sweat, and gripped his chest. He staggered out of the cafeteria, trying to make it back to the kitchen. I heard a thump, and ran after him. Death followed.

Arthur stood over his fallen body, looking down in shock.

“Oh dear lord,” he said. “I…”

“Yes, you are,” Death confirmed. “But you have passed the test set out for you.”

He turned to me. “There was no poison in the food.”

XII

After Death had taken Arthur Brown to his judgment, I asked Death about something that had occurred to me while waiting in the timeless room.

“About prayer,” I began. “We are told to pray without ceasing and to bring our requests to God. I realize that prayer is more than asking for things. I know that it’s about communion and all that. But why pray for things when God has already decided what to do anyway? God doesn’t change his mind. So why do we bother making requests?”

“Because when God intervenes he considers all factors, “Death replied. “Even the prayers of his creatures. His yes or no is related to all else. And for the prayers to be a factor in the first place, they still have to happen in time.”

“But God doesn’t change,” I repeated.

“In a sense, he has already completed all of his work,” Death agreed. “In another he is ever in the process of doing it. Remember, he is above and beyond time. That is how he hears and considers all prayer. That is how he sees all and yet laws of nature and free will still have reality.”

“It is a hard thing to get around one’s head,” I answered.

“If humans are to believe in God at all, they must believe two things about him,” Death said. “They must believe that he is the creator and first cause of all. And that he is beyond tine. There is nothing before, no universe, no matter, no energy, no other gods, nothing that he worked with other than his own will and power. If you can believe that, really believe though you understand not fully, then everything else, creation,

providence, miracles, even the incarnation and resurrection become easy to believe by comparison."

"I believe," I said, looking at the heavenly door. "God, help me with my unbelief."

Death's face softened. "I know that to explain is not to explain away difficulty. You are still only dust. You need Him and you need one another. Pain, fear and doubt still take root in your souls and you need all the help you can get in your lives."

We were then no longer in the timeless room but were walking down a dimly lit passageway. It was the hall of some institution or ward, and there were open doors on either side. I glanced from my left to my right and saw elderly and sickly people, bedridden, resting, and in some cases, moaning with pain, physical and emotional. It was a nursing home.

Death suddenly grabbed my shoulder and pulled me into a side room. The masked figure passed by us, ever on the prowl. I could understand his being here, where there was so much misery.

After he had passed, we stepped back out into the hall and went to our destination. The room had a single occupant, and she was awake, reading a book. The woman’s face was worn and weather-beaten, her hair was completely grey, and her blue eyes were clouded and washed out.

As we approached, I saw that the woman was looking at a yearbook from about thirty years ago. She gazed upon the valedictorian, a beautiful blond girl named Tina Ward. Flipping through the book, she came across other entries for the girl. She had been class president, homecoming queen, and voted most likely to

succeed. Before a nurse called out, I guessed that the woman was looking at herself as she had once been.

“Tina? Are you awake?” a nurse called, poking her head in. “It’s time for your morning meds.”

Tina looked up as the nurse came in. She had dark features and thick glasses, and looked to be about the same age, albeit in much better health.

“Sam. When’s breakfast?” she asked, her voice dry and tired.

“Tina, you already ate,” Sam reminded her gently.

Tina’s brow furrowed, and she shrugged. “If you say so. I’m not really hungry.”

Sam handed her a handful of pills and some water.

“Alzheimer’s medicine,” Tina identified the meds. “In thirty years, I’ve become an old woman. Or at least got an old person’s disease.”

She flipped through the yearbook to a picture of an awkward looking bespeckled girl named Samantha Kitteridge.

“Look Sam. Your picture. The only one of you in the book”.

Sam said nothing.

“Then there was me. The golden girl. The one who had all her road before her. Not like now.”

She closed the book and shook her head. “Not like now.”

She took the pills. “Tell me, Sam. Do they do any good? I’m going to die eventually anyway aren’t I? What good do these do?”

“You want to have a quality of life for as long as you can,” Sam replied. She looked over her shoulder. “Would you like me to take you to the garden? Or would you like to speak with the minister?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m not saying God isn’t there,” Tina argued to a younger, clean shaven, well dressed man. “I’m saying why doesn’t he answer my prayers?”

“God answers every prayer,” the younger man, the minister said. “He doesn’t always say yes, though.”

“I’m not asking for anything stupid, like a car or a flat screen,” she argued back. “I just want my health back. It’s not selfish to want health.”

She glanced around the room, upset and exasperated. “I mean, what’s the point of this? Why

should I stay sick? I can't do anything for him like this. I serve no purpose."

"That's not true," the minister told her. "Your purpose is to give us someone to minister to. The nurses, doctors and I love our neighbor by loving you, if you will let us."

"You mean you'll keep this going just so you feel good?" she asked, getting angry. "So you can go home feeling like you did something?"

"No, no. We would never do that," he protested. "We want to heal, to hand up and not hand out. If I could heal you, I would, believe me. But not everyone can be healed; only cared for."

"You're so caring, too."

"Ms. Ward…"

"Just go."

“You know what I want, Sam?” Tina was asking. The leaves were falling out of the trees now, as seen from her window. However, I could see that it was now a couple years later, and not merely a few months. Tina appeared older and weaker, and even Sam was developing wrinkles around her mouth and eyes.

“What’s that?” the nurse asked.

“To smoke a cigarette with you out on the porch,” the patient replied.

“You shouldn’t. I’m trying to quit myself.”

“So I’ll take some of the ones you would’ve smoked. It’s not like my life is going to be shortened from it anyway.”

“Must you be so morbid?”

“This place doesn’t lend itself to smiles and sunshine.”

Sam helped Tina up and led her into the hall, down the stairs and outside. Sam fumbled for her lighter and pack and lit a cigarette for each of them. Tina puffed on it for a moment, her brow furrowing. She looked like she was trying to remember something.

“Sam,” she said after a few minutes. “Did I used to bully you in high school?”

“Sometimes. But it was more middle school,” she answered. “In high school you ignored me.”

They continued smoking for a few minutes. “I was just a child, you know.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t think about it.”

“But I need to think, to remember. It’s getting harder.”

Her voice caught and tears welled up in her eyes. She put out her cigarette and cupped Sam’s face in her hands.

“Hey,” she said with a smile. Her lip was trembling. “I wasn’t the nicest girl all the time. But I was a child, right? I was going to grow up, to go places. To make a difference. Most likely to succeed. That was the plan. That’s what was supposed to happen.”

Tears were streaming down her face now. “Not this.”

She buried her face in Sam’s shoulder and cried.

“Tina. It’s bedtime.”

Sam was standing in the doorway. Time had passed them by yet again, and Tina was in bed, looking at a picture. It showed her in a wedding dress, married to a distinguished but obviously much older man.

“I found it,” she told Sam. “My husband. His name was…”

She frowned and paused, struggling with the fading memory.

“Harold,” Sam finished.

“I don’t remember how we met,” Tina went on. “I remember the wedding though. And after. I remember the whispers, the laughter, and the accusations. Gold digger and trophy wife.”

She put the picture down, and turned off her light. “But I really did love him. That I do remember.”

“Tina?” Sam called out, some alarm creeping into her voice. She checked her charge, whose skin had grown clammy and whose breathing had acquired a rattle.

“Soon,” Death told me.

In front of the dying patient, the television was on. The ball was getting ready to drop in Times Square. A new year was dawning, although I couldn’t tell which year.

Tina looked at Sam, her eyes glazed over. She reached out and the nurse took her hand. The ball dropped and people began singing Auld Lang Sine. The two women did as well, and I was going to ask Death if he had met the original author.

Tina’s labored breathing stopped, and a most likely to succeed graduate breathed her last.

I saw her spirit leave and stand over her body. I saw Sam check Tina’s vitals and then leave the room. The dead woman stood there, dazed. Then she turned and looked at us.

“So, it’s over,” she said. “And you. You’ve come for me haven’t you? Somehow I know.”

“Yes, Tina Ward,” Death said. “What are you thinking about?”

“That it’s good just to be able to think again,” she replied.

Sam entered with some orderlies. She was filling out forms, but paused to touch the hand of Tina’s corpse. Tina put her hand on the nurse’s shoulder.

“Sam. Thank you. Thank you for everything.”

Sam started, and looked around. But we were invisible to her, so after looking around for a few minutes, she returned to her form.

Tina looked at Death. “Was that the reason why? So they could minister to me?”

“Yes. You were not being punished for past mistakes or unkindness,” Death told her. “Nor did you cause the disease. Some things are simply the result of living in a fallen world. They are permitted so you, and those around you, could be tested and tempered.”

“I still had to go through it though,” she said, with a flash of anger. “I feel and think okay now, but there were years where I didn’t.”

“I know. I am sorry. Heartache and hope are both the lot of creatures in time. And to explain why is not to explain away. I can only say that, for the faithful, even

the most painful of lives lived in time will seem but a bad dream against the backdrop of eternity.”

“You are an angel, right?” she asked.

“You may say that.”

“And who are you?” she asked me.

“One who is learning alongside him,” I answered.

XIII

“Kenneth, don’t do it,” a firefighter yelled to one of his comrades.

Death and I were standing in front of a burning building. The fire department had arrived on the scene, and were doing their best to try and contain the blaze. But the men hadn’t accounted for everyone who was supposed to be in the building, and the inferno had only increased in intensity.

“I have to, Dave,” Kenneth said. “There might be someone else there.”

Before Dave could protest further, Kenneth ran into the building. I waited for a moment, wondering who we would be escorting this time. Soon, I saw the answer to my unspoken question.

An explosion sounded from the inside of the building, and Kenneth emerged from the doorway in a daze. Dave and the other firefighters shouted, and readied their hoses. They sprayed into the door in a desperate attempt to keep it from spreading any further.

As they did so, I saw that the streams of water passed right through their fellow firefighter, and I knew that Kenneth hadn’t survived. The figure now staggering towards the street was his ghost.

“Kenneth Johnson,” Death hailed. Kenneth looked over at us, his eyes glazed over, and his lips

slightly parted. He looked at us for a moment and then looked over his shoulder at the water being sprayed into the house. Fortunately, it was apparently keeping the fire from spreading to the outside. The firefighters shouted and worked their hardest, as a crowd of onlookers watched and waited tensely. Sirens screamed, announcing the arrival of police, paramedics, and more firefighters.

A second firefighter emerged from the doorway, cradling an unconscious young man, burned, but still breathing. At least, I thought, whomever Kenneth had been trying to save wouldn't die too. At least not in this moment.

All this the three of us watched. Kenneth just stared blankly, as if watching a movie rather than real life. Death put a hand on his shoulder. "Come," he said,

not unkindly. “You have done your duty. They will do theirs.”

Kenneth still didn’t speak, but allowed himself to be led on as we disappeared into the timeless room. He still didn’t speak as Death led him to the heavenly door. As I waited, I realized that he, although a ghost, was in a state of shock. I don’t think it had occurred to him yet that he had died. Hopefully, the presence of God would take him out of it. I knew he was a good man, and prayed that he knew the Lord as well.

The weightiness of what I was doing suddenly hit me, and I knelt on the ground. It was hard to keep doing this, seeing people in their final moments. For most of the deaths I had seen had been violent, or at least sad. Of course, that was no surprise, but I wondered how it was that Death could have done this for as long as he had.

When he emerged, I asked him. “How do you keep from despair?” I asked. “Or are you in fact as miserable as the people you escort?”

Death blinked. “But I know that they go on to be with their Lord. Those who know him, that is. As for the others, yes I grieve, although not as the Lord does. I believe that he suffers more than any of us for the lost, and not merely from having done so at Golgotha. He is beyond time, and I imagine that he sees all suffering forever and always, just as he also sees all joyous moments. His joy and sorrow must be greater than yours or mine ever could be.”

“I know, I know, it’s just that… I’ve seen so much misery with you. How do you not succumb to bitterness, or apathy to keep from growing bitter?”

“Not every death is miserable. Some are relief from pain and illness. It is both the result of and

punishment for sin. Yet it can also be a mitigation of suffering from other sources. Besides, there are some deaths that are quite peaceful, and are merely the passing of good people from their lives to their eternity."

"I should very much like to see a peaceful one."

"I think I can do that. Yes, it will be well to do so before our final visit."

He took my hand and led me forward. The timeless room vanished, and I found myself in a wide open field. It was a warm summer day, without a cloud in the sky. Despite the blunted feelings I had, I could feel the gentle breeze and hear the birds singing off in the distance. Death led me to a tree and sat down. He bade me do the same, and we gazed out over the field. I saw that corn was planted there; we were in a Midwestern farm somewhere, sometime.

A tractor appeared on the horizon, and I saw an old man at the wheel. Dressed in overalls and a ball cap to keep out the sun, he wiped the sweat from his brow, looked from side to side, and smiled. He had been working all morning, and seemed pleased with the results.

"That is Abraham Stokes," Death told me. "A farmer his whole life, family man, and usher in his church. For ninety years, he has been part of this place. Part of the land. He loves it as only those whose life's work is bound to it can."

Abraham stopped the tractor, got off, and sat down in the shade of the tree where we were. He stretched out for a nap, but gazed once more at the field he had tended year after year for so long. His neighbors could hardly remember a time when he hadn't been

there, tending the land, and they almost believed that he would do so forever.

Of course such would not be the case. Even the simple and good must leave the Earth in their time. He fell asleep, and snored lightly for a while. I smiled slightly at him, liking him even though I had never seen or heard of him before now. Death did nothing but remain sitting and looking out over the horizon. I did so as well, grateful for the respite.

The afternoon seemed to drag on for more than the few hours allotted to it, and I don't know for sure if the time passed for me normally in that moment, or if Death let me stay in the moment longer than usual given its serenity. Either way, I was grateful for it.

Eventually, the farmer's breathing stopped. I looked at him, and saw his soul rise from his body. It blinked, stretched, and stood.

“Abraham Stokes,” Death called. “It is time.”

Mr. Stokes looked over at us, mildly surprised. “Hello there,” he said. “I didn’t hear you come up. Sorry, I often fall asleep in the afternoon. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Then he looked down and saw his body. “What?”

“Yes,” Death confirmed. “You have passed away. You will be meeting the Lord soon.”

“That was all it was?” he asked. “I didn’t feel anything.”

“You died in your sleep. Painlessly. You are more fortunate than most.”

“Yeah. That’s the way everyone wants to go, isn’t it?” he chuckled suddenly. “Do I have you to thank or the Lord?”

“The Lord always, and for every good thing.”

“I’m ready, I guess. I’ve had a good life. Can’t complain, even if it did do any good.”

I smiled and he chuckled again. Death took him away to the timeless room and to what was beyond, for him, an eternal reward.

XIV

The back door in the timeless room I have spoken little about until now. But I did enter it, and the time to relate that part of my strange travels has come. I can put it off no longer, for it occurred after Death had escorted Abraham Stokes into his meeting with God.

Death approached me and told me that my time with him was drawing to a close.

“I have enjoyed your company,” he told me. “It’s rare to have someone as thoughtful and as pleasant as you. But your time is coming. You have been permitted to accompany me so that you may record what you learn and deliver it back to your fellows.”

“I had hoped to see more people from more time periods,” I said. “Is there no way I can remain longer?”

There are two more places for you to go,” Death replied. “But they are not on earth. They are the two doors in this room.”

Again I looked at the back door. A feeling of dread overtook me, and I shrank away.

“Must I go there?”

“Yes. I will accompany you though. You will not be expected to make the journey alone.”

He stepped past me and turned the knob. The door opened silently and rather anticlimactically. I was expecting something like a loud creak, followed by screams or a burst of heat or cold. But there was only the darkness and silence from my vantage point.

I stepped in the doorway and looked around. The light from the timeless room only penetrated a few feet into the space. I saw after a few feet of featureless ground, that a wide chasm opened up. Cautiously I looked over the edge and could see no bottom. Looking out, I could not see where the other side of the deep chasm was. I could only make out a small pinprick of red light.

“I must take you over the abyss,” Death said. I turned and saw that he had resumed his original form of the cherubim Calculon. He outstretched his arms and I went into his embrace.

He took to the air, beating his six wings and spiriting me over the chasm. I looked behind me and saw the doorway from whence we came growing steadily smaller, and the red light getting steadily larger. By and by, I saw another doorway, with a dull red light issuing from it.

How can I describe my feeling going over that lonely yawning pit? While I had no fear that my guide would drop me, I also did not want to go nearer to the red light.

Death landed on the other side of the chasm and sat me down. I saw that there was a stair where the red light was coming from. A few bones littered the way, but we easily picked through them as we made our descent.

As we went down, my discomfort increased. Nor was it only a matter of fear, but a physical discomfort. I wanted to stop and turn back, but Death, still in his cherubim form, urged me on. I wanted to pray, but found it harder to.

I soon realized the reason why. Hell is described largely in terms of being separated from God. This is significant because all good things come from God. Not only food and pleasant weather, but physical comfort and health as well. So without Gods' presence, there is only pain, both physical and mental.

There have been and will be those who accuse God of creating hell as a sort of torture chamber, the way an evil man would. It is not so. Hell wasn't even created in the sense that heaven and earth were. With these, God poured his will, power and goodness into them at the moment of their creation. Hell, on the other hand, came to be when God withdrew Himself from a corner of existence. This was for those who wanted nothing to do with God. On Earth, no one, not even the staunchest atheist, has ever been completely without God. Such a one enjoys many of God's gifts, though he denies and

curses the giver. In hell, there truly is no God, and no good.

My skin grew hot to the touch, and I felt weaker as I descended the stairs. I tried to stop, but Death, stronger than me, held me up by the arm and guided me through the last step. At the bottom, I saw a room like a sanctuary, only it was comprised entirely of mirrors. The walls, ceiling, floor, and pews were all mirrored glass that reflected the red light everywhere.

I slowly staggered my way down the aisle. Empty pews flanked me and I looked at the far wall. A chair was there, and turned away from me. Above it were two circular clusters of mirrors, which reminded me of an insect’s compound eyes.

The ‘eyes’ cast my reflection back at me and when I finally reached the end of the aisle, the throne swiveled towards me. The figure in the porcelain mask sat there.

I staggered and began quaking in my shoes. How I wanted to turn and flee, but I only had the strength to stand. My throat was dry now, and my nose was filled with a foul odor. I could barely even think, for thought and reason are also gifts from God, and here there was no God.

“Well?” I managed to squeeze out of my dry throat when the figure made no move. Then it began to speak in a hollow voice.

“I will not bow down, worship, submit, cooperate, show empathy, sympathy or love. My life is my own. I am my own God.”

I shook my head, trying to clear it. I ached all over as if I had run a hundred miles and then been beaten.

“I am my own God,” the figure repeated. “I am…I… I…I… I, I, I…”

The speech degenerated into a faster and more high pitched repetition of that syllable, ‘I’. It couldn’t think either without God’s goodness, that is, couldn’t think or see past itself. I perceived that it too was in pain but like a wounded animal wanted to lash out and tear apart anything or anyone who came near it. Any goodness, any kinder feeling or thoughts were long gone, gone with the rejection of God.

“I, I, I, I…”

I felt a rush of strength and reached out to the figure, wanting to do something, anything, to silence the voice. My fingers touched the mask, and I ripped it from the face.

The figure had no face.

Or rather there was a roughly shaped face with depressions where a mouth and eyes went. There were

bulges corresponding to a nose and ears. But no features. It was another type of mirror, reflecting my horrified face back at me, as if it were some kind of mannequin made of reflective material.

The figure laughed and laughed at me. The mirrors all seemed to spin around me, and all I could see was myself and red light. I screamed and all I could feel was pain. The bible tells us that in him we live move and have our being. St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that this doesn't mean pantheism or that we are all 'part' of God. Rather it refers to agency. Everything we have and are we owe to God. All our good physical, mental and spiritual traits are put there and maintained by God.

But there, there is no God.

I felt a hand grab mine, and suddenly I was back in the timeless room. Death was there with me, and again

in his grey, unassuming human form. The door we had used was once again sealed.

While I felt my physical strength returning, the fear and anguish was still there. I burst into tears, and Death unexpectedly embraced me. I sobbed and prayed that God would ease the pain and fade the memories.

“Why? Why did I have to go there?” I asked at last.

“So you could feel and experience for yourself,” Death said. “And having done so, to tell others. Too many of your kind either accuse God of creating a torture chamber, or they choose not to believe hell exists at all. It is a very human tendency to only believe what one likes and agrees with. So for any of you to assert a truth to your fellows, means others assume you like whatever you are asserting. Truth, however, exists regardless of feeling. To profess truth is to assert what is, regardless of how you feel.”

“I never liked the phrase ‘religious preference’ for that very reason. It makes belief sound like mere opinion,” I replied. “But I already believed.”

“Ah, but faith and reason alone do not make up the whole of a man. There is also feeling, impulse, memory, and experience. All of these must be cultivated in order to have the fullest view of the world you can have.”

“You’re repeating my own words back to me. I see what you are trying to say but…”

“I know. To explain is not to explain away. Hell is still a place of horror, and no attempt to deny or soften the blow will change that. But what must be understood is that God gave Himself to be the wages of sin. To pay the price for the punishment earned at Eden. He had done all short of forcing the unwilling to obey. That He will not do. Come. It is time to see what is beyond the other door.”

He led me to that door I had seen him go through before. The door into heaven. He opened it, and I went in.

XV

At first, I could see nothing for the bright white light. Then, somehow, my eyes adjusted and I saw that sight that had greeted John in his Revelation so long ago. I stood on an immense glass floor. At the other end were four beings, not unlike Death in his Calculon form, singing praise to the One seated on the throne behind them. Twenty four elders flanked the throne on smaller thrones of their own, and hosts of angels flew about.

And the One on the throne? How can I describe Him? Where are the words? Our languages, our minds, are too limited to fully say. Nor can we ever know His mind and what it is like to be Him. I realized in an instant that my conversations with Death were still only

ideas about the universe, as we perceived it. But we must not think for a moment that we fully understand God, what He is or how He thinks. And while our ideas fit with what we know about the Bible, Christian thinkers, and the world around us, they can only be approximations. They may well be knowledge, but still are incomplete. If wrong, then the truth is something more complex and more wonderful still.

I fell to my face, filled with love, awe, and fear at the same time. Before Him, I was stark naked, laid bare. Only He could protect me from Himself.

“Man,” a voice called from the throne. “Open your journals. Write and read aloud all you have seen, heard and felt.”

I did, for how could I not? I wrote, shaking, and spoke slowly and deliberately. When finished, I heard a call of “It is enough.”

I stopped and waited.

“Man, look about you.”

I saw something that took me by complete surprise. For I had not filled one but all of my notebooks. Scores of sheets littered the ground at my feet. I took them up and read through them. They had all been filled with the same account, this account, over and over.

Motion without change.

A moment that had no duration.

Beyond time.

“This then is your choice, man,” the voice continued. “To choose this moment with me, or the other moment, with only yourself. To drink from the fountain, or to cut off your source. You will return to Earth and deliver the record of these things.”

I looked around, and saw that Death was not with me.

“Calculon has no place here,” the voice said. “Nor will he in the new time, the new heavens and the new earth that come at the end of your time and your earth. He will travel back and forth through the old time, but never further. Thus he is the last enemy to be defeated.”

“But, Lord, is he an enemy?” I asked, amazed at my courage. Instantly I understood that He supplied the courage to ask.

“His office, the wages of sin, is the enemy. Do not pity him, for he chose to fill the office when no other would. Calculon has his reward. And his fate.”

I then found myself back in my study and back in my body.

I write these final words in one of the many journals I have. So all will know of time, eternity, and the roles Death, the dead, and the living play. I feel that he will come back for me soon. Very well. God’s will be done. To my poor wife, mourn me not. We will be together in time. No. Outside of time.

Postscript

At this point, the manuscript ends. Levi Christopher was found hunched over the complete written account with the unfinished copies at his feet. His death was ruled a heart attack and after mourning him, his wife consented to its publication

Walter Jameson

Death at Calvary

In older tales from Medieval Europe,
there's a legend told by a few,
of an immortal man who walks the Earth,
only known as the wandering Jew.

It's said he was there on the first Easter,
with the crowd who of one accord,
demanded Pilate release Barabbas,
and instead crucify the Lord.

This same man waited for the Christ to come,
dragging his own cross through the street.
Beaten nearly to death and crowned with thorns,
that he still could walk was a feat.

One of the Pharisees, so it is said,
looked at Christ and did laugh.
Because of this pitiless lack of care,
he earned God the father's great wrath.

God the Father ordained the Pharisee,
that after Christ's death and rebirth,
that the man would live till the end of days,
wandering alone on the Earth.

His burden and punishment would then be
to preach Christ, salvation from sin.
He'd be immortal, unable to rest,
until Jesus Christ came again.

That's the legend they told in West Europe,
when the Middle Ages were new.

And it was because of their bigotry,

they said the sinner was a Jew.

They said the Jewish people killed the Christ.

They forgot why the Christ appeared.

If they truly want to know who killed Christ,

they have but to look in the mirror.

Christ was born for the purpose of dying.

That's why he came into the world.

And it was through the Jewish people that

God's plan for salvation unfurled.

God's chosen people, children of Jacob,

whom he gave the prophets and law.

Blood and life required to pay for sins.

Isaiah’s prophecy told all.

Sin paid for salvation offered to all.

To Gentiles and yes, also Jews.

Why then persecute and hate God's people?

This theology isn't new.

'Love one another, as I have loved you.'

Christ told all to love, not to hate.

'Be doers, not hearers of the Word.'

Let your hypocrisy abate.

While I've denounced the legend's racism,

I confess, one part of it's true.

There really is one who wanders the Earth.

I'm the one they thought was a Jew.

But Jew I am not, nor am I human.

On the Earth, I've never drawn breath.

I'm not of matter. I am a spirit.

I'm an angel, angel of Death.

When mortal man dies, I come to their side.

I guide them to meet their maker.

To all I come, whether sinner or saint,

to the true men and the fakers.

Some people have glimpsed me from time to time,

a nondescript man in grey.

At different times and different places,

and so to explain me away.

They imagined a deathless man on Earth,

who'd been seen by more than a few.

They knew not it was the angel of death,

so they made the wandering Jew.

But I was in Jerusalem that day.
I was with the Lord when he died.
As he carried the cross, Satan followed,
puffed up with his infernal pride.

He figured by slaying the Son of God,
that his rebellion was complete.
At his fall he wished to ruin God's world,
killing the Son his greatest feat.

But I knew the future, what would come next.
In the end, Satan feels God's wrath.

It was not the Lord I mocked that day,

It was at Satan that I laughed.